

# Paul Gauguin (French, 1848–1903)

Gauguin began collecting works by the impressionists in the 1870s. A successful stockbroker, he studied painting under Pissarro and soon abandoned his middle-class life to be an artist, participating in the impressionists' last four group exhibitions. By the late 1880s, though, impressionism's preoccupation with visual effects no longer satisfied him. Like contemporary symbolist writers, he sought to express interior states rather than surface appearances.

In 1886 Gauguin went to Pont Aven in Brittany, a rugged land of fervently religious people far from the urban sophistication of Paris. There he forged a new style. He was at the center of group of avant-garde artists who dedicated themselves to *synthétisme*, ordering and simplifying sensory data to its fundamentals. Gauguin's greatest innovation was his use of color, which he employed not for its ability to mimic nature but for its ability to communicate intangibles through its inherent emotive qualities. He applied it in broad flat areas outlined with dark paint, which tended to flatten space and abstract form. This flattening of space and symbolic use of color would be important influences on early twentieth-century artists.

In Brittany Gauguin had hoped to tap the expressive potential he believed rested in a more rural, even "primitive" culture. Over the next several years he traveled often between Paris and Brittany, spending time also in Panama and Martinique. In 1891 his rejection of European urban values led him to Tahiti, where he expected to find an unspoiled culture, exotic and sensual; instead, he was confronted with a world already transformed by Western missionaries and colonial rule. In large measure Gauguin had to invent the world he sought, not only in paintings but with woodcarvings, graphics, and written works. As he struggled with ways to express the questions of life and death, knowledge and evil that preoccupied him, he interwove the images and mythology of island life with those of the West and other cultures. After a trip to France in 1893 and 1894, Gauguin returned to spend his remaining years, marred by illness and depression, in the South Seas.



*Landscape at Le Pouldu, 1890*

After his first stay in Brittany, Gauguin returned to Paris in time for the 1889 international exposition marking the centennial of the French Revolution. Refused space at the official art exhibition, he mounted an independent show with several colleagues near the entrance to the huge fair, billing their work "impressioniste et synthétiste," but it was not a success. He decided to escape Paris and its scornful critics. Among the most popular attractions at the exposition, and Gauguin's personal favorites, had been performances by Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and a troupe of Javanese dancers—Gauguin began to talk of emigrating to the more exotic lands of Tonkin (Vietnam), Madagascar, or Tahiti. But he returned instead to Brittany.

In 1889 he found the village of Pont-Aven crowded with artists. Seeking a more isolated—and less expensive—environment, he and several colleagues took up residence in Le Pouldu, a small hamlet nine kilometers distant. From there they made many expeditions to the countryside, but their landscapes, like this one, were painted primarily from memory and sketches. "Don't copy nature too literally," Gauguin advised. "Art is abstraction; draw art as you dream in nature's presence, and think more about the act of creation than about the final result."

Oil on canvas, .733 x .924 m (28 7/8 x 36 3/8 in.)  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.20



*Self-Portrait, 1889*

Gauguin painted many self-portraits, but few are as enigmatic as this one. It was part of the decoration that Gauguin and his colleague Meyer de Haan created for the dining room of the inn where they were staying in Le Pouldu. In six weeks, soon after their arrival in late 1889, they made dozens of ceramic works, woodcarvings, and sculpture, and they covered the walls with paintings. This self-portrait, and a paired portrait Gauguin did of de Haan, may have decorated cupboard doors.

At the time, Gauguin's likeness was described by friends as an "unkind character sketch"—a caricature. Today, it is the subject of intense analysis. Some see the artist casting himself in the role of Satan, others as Christ. What are we to make of the imagery—the apples that precipitate man's fall from grace; the halo over Gauguin's disembodied head; the snake that is both tempter of Eve and the embodiment of knowledge; the bold division into vivid yellow and red, evocative of both hellfire and the heat of creation? Perhaps it is most likely that Gauguin is revealing his conception of the artist as hero, and—almost to challenge his colleagues—of himself, particularly, as a kind of magus, a master who knows that he possesses the power of magic by virtue of talent and genius.

Oil on wood, .792 x 513 m (31 1/4 x 20 1/4 in.)  
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.150



*Haystacks in Brittany, 1890*

This stylized view of fields and farm buildings near Le Pouldu is typical of the so-called "synthétiste" works that Gauguin painted in Brittany in 1890. Its forms are simplified, abstracted to their essence. In 1888 Gauguin had defined his goal as "...synthesis of form and color derived from the observation of only the dominant element."

The friezelike procession of cows and cowherd in the foreground coaxes our eye to move horizontally, and we find that the entire composition is arranged into bands, layered one on the other. Even the sky is stratified. Strong contrast of dark and light—exploited especially in the black-and-white cows and the flowering crops—flatten forms, rendering them more decorative than descriptive. The vivid and unexpected oranges in the foreground do not mimic nature but cast it according to the artist's imagination. Notice how the silhouette of the cow at right is outlined against the orange with dark blue. In many places similar outlines compartmentalize colors, in the manner of cloisonné enamels or stained glass. This was a style Gauguin had evolved with fellow artist Emil Bernard. It grew out of Bernard's interest in medieval art and Gauguin's own fascination with Japanese prints.

Oil on canvas, .743 x .936 m (29 1/4 x 36 7/8 in.)  
Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of  
Marie N. Harriman 1972.9.11



*Parau na te Varua ino (Words of the Devil), 1892*

It is unlikely that anyone who saw this painting when it was exhibited in Paris in 1893 would have understood the Tahitian legend Gauguin inscribed on it. Its symbolism remains complex. The masked kneeling figure is the “varua ino” of the title, a malevolent spirit who materializes as strange and frightening human forms. The standing woman, on the other hand, is associated through her gestures evoking modesty and shame with Western images of Eve after the Fall. When Gauguin traveled to Polynesia, he took with him a collection of photographs—of Renaissance paintings, the Parthenon, the Buddhist temple of Borobudur—and often incorporated these images in his Tahitian painting.

Yet this is not simply a Western theme in Polynesian guise. Among the women of Tahiti, Gauguin discover profound spiritual forces at work. In the Polynesian Even he identified a channel through which spiritual energy enters the everyday world. Probably she represented knowledge of good and evil, of life and human morality—part of Gauguin’s long fascination with life and death. At the upper right, under the curiously serpentine red and green face, Gauguin inserts himself into the scene with the depiction of a sketchy hand, an emblem he used also in self-portraits (see early entry).

Oil on canvas, .917 x .685 m (36 1/8 x 27 in.)  
Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of  
Marie N. Harriman 1972.9.12



*Fatata te Miti, 1892*

Like *Parau na te Varua ino*, *Fatata te Miti* was painted during Gauguin’s first trip to Tahiti. Its setting, in fact, is quite similar. The two paintings share brilliant pink sands and vividly colored accents, the brilliant fringed blossoms of the phosphorescing *hutu*, and on the left the same unusually shaped tree. These similarities point to Gauguin’s use of “documents,” the term he used for sketches and working drawings, which he would incorporate into many paintings and prints.

Their similarities invite us to compare the two works, and in other respects we find they are quite different. Where *Parau na te Varua ino* is densely symbolic, this painting is a more straightforward depiction of life on the island. One woman removes her pareo to join a companion already plunging into the sea for a swim. Nearby a man fishes with a spear. The intense, tropical colors—hot oranges and cool blues—convey sensual delight. This is the effortless and uninhibited paradise that Gauguin had hoped to find in the South Seas. Little remained of this life, however, by the time Gauguin reached Tahiti. Polynesian culture had been transformed by Western missionaries and colonial efforts, and the ancient religion replaced by Christianity. Gauguin wrote and illustrated a manuscript about Polynesian mythology, but most of what he knew about the island gods came from published sources.

Oil on canvas, .679 x .915 m (26 3/4 x 36 in.)  
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.149

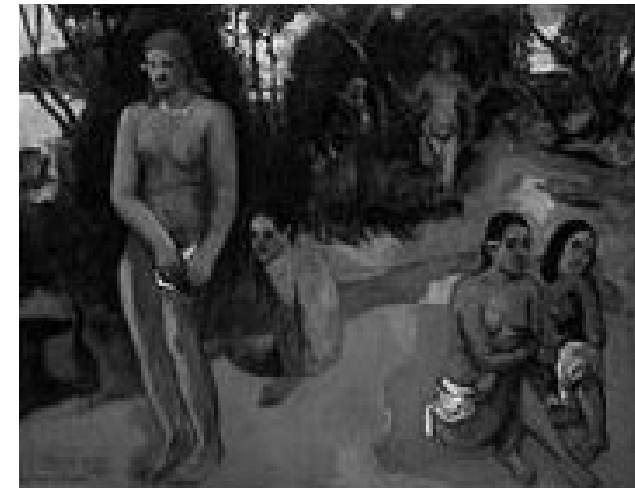


*The Bathers, 1897*

Like the *Te Pape Nave Nave* (next entry), this work was painted after Gauguin’s return to Tahiti from Paris. Notice how the colors of these later pictures are nuanced, more blended than the flatter, more intense hues found in the two earlier ones. He has still outlined many of his shapes, yet they nonetheless appear softer, and the large areas of colors are neither so bold nor so distinct. Here, especially, the coarse texture and heavy weave of the canvas add a tapestrylike effect. Whereas the earlier works from Tahiti are vivid and direct, those painted during his second trip have a more dreamlike appearance and spiritual intensity. The figures are more monumental, with an aura of timelessness and dignity. And their color is more expressive.

Gauguin had always been preoccupied with the role of color, calling it a “profound and mysterious language, a language of the dream.” He described its effects as akin to music and its relationships to musical harmonies. The gentle tones here—the soft mat of pinks that carpets the foreground, the swirls of lavender water—are scented with the sweet perfumes of paradise. This is one of the most sumptuous of all Gauguin’s painting. *The Bathers* probably once belonged to Edgar Degas, who owned several works by Gauguin.

Oil on canvas, .604 x .934 m (23 3/4 x 36 3/4 in.)  
Gift of Sam A. Lewisohn 1951.5.1



*Te Pape Nave Nave (Delectable Waters), 1898*

In 1898, Gauguin sent a group of works for exhibition in Paris. The centerpiece was a painting more than twelve-feet long on hemp sacking material with the French inscription, “*Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?*” Intended to be seen with it were eight identically sized smaller works that were excerpted from “*Where are we going?*” These were not preparatory studies but variations painted after the larger work was completed and so represented a kind of rethinking or perhaps summing up by the artist. This painting is one of these smaller works.

One of the figures repeated here from the larger work is the blue goddess. As Gauguin described her, she “...seems to indicate the hereafter.” She is the Polynesian deity Hina, but as her worship—and idols—had already disappeared from the island, Gauguin modeled after a Hindu goddess in his collection of photographs. Gauguin intended “*Where are we going?*” to be his final artistic statement. He had been ill and depressed and, as he wrote friends, had attempted suicide. Though it relates generally to themes of life and death, represented at opposite ends of the canvas by an infant and an old woman, Gauguin left “*Where are we going?*” deliberately mysterious: “...Known symbols would congeal the canvas into a melancholy reality,” he wrote, “and the problem indicated would no longer be a poem.”

Oil on canvas, .740 x .953 m (29 1/8 x 37 1/2 in.)  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1973.68.2